Finding Time: Reflections on English Discussion Lesson and Activity Timing in the Shift to Online Lessons During the COVID-19 Pandemic

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Abstract

In this paper, I reflect on lesson structure and timing changes in the transition to online lessons for my English discussion classes during the COVID-19 global pandemic. The focus is largely on my compression of lesson sections to achieve lesson and class goals within a greatly reduced in-class timeframe. I find that, despite significant differences between the in-class and online lesson environment, the core objectives of the course may still be met. I explore the manner in which the core elements of the course were preserved in the transition to the online format while addressing the shifts in the teacher-student and student-student in-lesson dynamics that resulted from this transition.

Keywords: timing, lesson structure, COVID-19, online lessons

Introduction

In response to the COVID-19 global pandemic, and with the intention of ensuring student and faculty safety, Rikkyo University, my workplace, made the decision to conduct classes online (through the use of various platforms including Zoom) for the Spring and Fall 2020 semesters. In this paper, I shall focus on timing-related changes to my Spring semester English discussion classes. Prior to this change, English Discussion classes would meet on campus for 100-minute lessons with approximately 10 students per class. These on-campus lessons consisted of various sections to present language skills (i.e., asking for opinions, giving sources of information, etc.), provide for practice of those skills, and provide an extended period during which students demonstrate their ability to produce the aforementioned skills within the context of two group discussions. This standard format, as I am tempted to describe it, allows a great deal of time for fine-tuning regarding language use.

In contrast to the 100-minute format, my online lesson format included a 40 minute online portion, delivered through the Zoom platform, followed by a 60 minute offline portion, during which time students completed various assignments and tasks on their own. The online portion involved only 4-5 students at a time, as opposed to the full class of 8-10 in a traditional face-to-face lesson, and, therefore, necessitated conducting the various lesson stages twice per class in order to accommodate all students. Part of the logic for this division was the reality of limited network access on part of the students, as many students connect via cellular networks and, particularly in Japan, often have strict limits on data usage. Another reason was logistics. If I am to fully assess student performance, particularly in the production phase during which all students speak together for a continuous 12-15 minutes, I must not divide my attention between entirely separate breakout rooms.[1]

The technical aspects of the modifications of the class are sensible enough, I think. However, from the outset of the Spring semester, I harbored some concern that students might be at a disadvantage

1 A breakout room is a sub-grouping of individuals within a Zoom meeting. Breakout rooms allow for concurrent pair and group work.

as a result of being in a Zoom lesson as opposed to a real-world lesson. This is not because of any bias against technology or its increasingly prevalent role in the classroom, but simply because any individual student will have, as a consequence of the changes outlined above, less time actively speaking, as compared to students in the in-class lessons as well as less time to receive and act upon feedback. Through reflection on the actual class outcomes, I wish to determine if my concerns were founded. In other words, I wish to determine the extent of disadvantages of the online format, more specifically, the lesson timing choices I made to adapt to it, regarding student performance. Further, I wish to determine what lessons may be derived from my experiences in the Spring 2020 semester, which may inform my choices with regard to online and on-campus courses in the future.

Discussion

Virtually all changes to the format of my English Discussion lessons can be attributed to reduced time. The pace of the 100-minute in-class lesson was leisurely by comparison. In the 40-minute online class, my focus was always on providing the basic steps of presentation of language skills, practice, and production in as efficient a manner as possible. One example of this efficiency was the use of the textbook often in conjunction with succinct PowerPoint presentations to introduce skills. Certainly, I would have used the textbook anyway, but perhaps while eliciting some of the information from students. Likewise, I am not opposed to the use of PowerPoint presentations, but I found that they began to fill a space that may formerly have involved very short speaking activities paired with focused feedback to highlight the correct use of and necessity for a given skill. A form of these short speaking activities was incorporated into subsequent sections of the lesson; however, the fact remains that that, from the start of the lesson, the structure had become more top-down.

Does this mean that the class was less student-centered? There are several points to consider. In the online classes, just as in the on-campus classes, student speaking time accounted for the greatest part of the lesson by far. However, necessity dictated that portions of the lesson that had formerly been reflective, that would have required students to examine their own use or non-use of skills, became to a greater extent times for teacher-fronted feedback. This was in the interest of always getting to the next speaking section so that students could act upon feedback and continue to refine their skill use. Further, more concise, more generalized feedback is not necessarily bad. Indeed, it has been found by some researchers to be more effective than "specific and elaborate feedback" (Murillo-Zamorano & Montanero, 2018, p.140). In my online classes students were at least as able to act upon teacher-fronted feedback as students had been able to act upon student-fronted feedback in the past. So, again, we might ask whether or not the changes outlined above constitute actually being less student-centered. I would say no. The student and their utterances remain the core of the class, but it would be fair to say that the changes to the class structure made it less reflective, less introspective.

I have written previously about the value of student introspection[2]. Teacher-fronted feedback is often viewed by students as being of greater value than other forms of feedback (Harland, et al., 2017). However, I have found that when students reflect upon their specific strengths and weaknesses in a discussion, they are typically able to devise some means for improvement. Indeed, I made this introspective self-feedback a feature of all my in-class discussion lessons. In the 40-minute online portion of my classes, it was not possible to incorporate very much of this component. If, for instance,

2 Tyner, A. (2020) Self and Group: Dynamics of Reflection in Student-to-Student Feedback, *New Directions in Teaching and Learning English Discussion, 8*, 65-70.

a student reflects for a minute or so and then reports feedback about their own performance to a partner for two minutes, and their partner does likewise, even without taking into account the logistics of creating breakout rooms and monitoring those breakout rooms, it is clear that across multiple discussions, this feedback would take an excessively significant portion of the class time. However, the classes are not 40 minutes in total, they are 100-minute classes divided between online and offline sections.

Indeed, to say that the lesson has been pared down to some minimal amount is to neglect the offline portion of the class. The 40 in-class minutes represents a condensed version of the in-class lesson structure. However, the offline portion is largely a new addition. Homework is nothing new. However, in this case, students are expected to complete a greater volume of work as a substitute for in-class time.

In my English discussion classes, the non-homework offline assignments usually, almost exclusively, consisted of writing assignments. These assignments involved reflection on the lesson's theme[3] and provided students a chance to explore the topics involved in a more personal manner while utilizing the language skills taught in the course to communicate their ideas. These writing activities often included students' reflections on their strengths and weaknesses with regard to the language skills taught in the class, whether or not a given assignment was meant to specifically address these points. I was very happy to see this. I was able to respond individually to students via email if they had specific questions or concerns, and I was able to more generally incorporate feedback into lessons for classes that had a comparatively large number of questions or which had noted a substantial number of strong or weak points. In other words, I was able to validate students' introspective self-feedback and provide more effective and actionable feedback as a result of this introspection. I could accomplish the same goal as had been previously accomplished by in-class self-reflective student feedback. Granted, the timing for this had changed. Feedback stemming from student writing came the subsequent week rather than immediately following a given activity. However, as the skills taught in the course are cumulative, they are built upon and continuously used, this feedback could, arguably, be just as actionable one week as another.

If the lesson structure, class dynamic, and feedback methodology all changed without apparent harm to the goals of the course, were there any changes necessitated by the shift to an online class format that had a negative impact? Yes, one. However, it is difficult to characterize the exact nature of the impact.

In a study of face-to-face, online, and hybrid classes that combined elements of the former two, Ritter, et al. (2010) found that "a greater sense of community was perceived by students who received all or some face-to-face contact with their professors" (p. 96). In Ritter's study, using the Classroom Community Scale, students in online classes scored lower on classroom community and connectedness. However, Ritter goes on to note that, "There was no statistically significant difference…in students' perceptions of learning across all three structures" (p. 96). These findings directly parallel my experiences with the online discussion course.

While I did not conduct a formal analysis as Ritter et al. did, I could feel, distinctly, a lessened sense of community amongst the students. This is not to say that the students did not get along with one another or that they did not participate well, they did. However, there was little time in class for

3 Each weekly lesson focused on a theme. These themes were explored prior to class in a reading assignment. In class, the theme, along with its accompanying reading assignment, provided background and context for the various speaking exercises as well as the lengthier student discussions.

light, casual discussion. The course was focused on learning and using particular language skills, and as a direct result of the time limitations and lesson structure changes outlined above, there was hardly any time to spare for the type of socializing one might expect in a classroom setting.

Indeed, the students could successfully discuss a variety of topics, though by observation, and consideration of comments made in student writing, it seems unlikely that many classmates would characterize their connection to their classmates as particularly close. In dealing with me, students, who in my experience would have become more comfortable speaking with me about class-related topics, often maintained a very formal tone, especially in their emails. This formality may be partially the result of formal writing habits, or it may be related to the fact that most students in the class were first year, first semester students unsure of the requisite level of formality. In any event, though it seems almost impossible to quantify, the mood of the class was clearly changed by the transition to the online format, and likely also by the choices I made with regard to class structure in the face of the time limitations previously outlined.

That said, students, by the end of the semester, commonly noted in their writing, their emails, and in-class utterances, that they felt they had improved as speakers and that they were more able to use the language skills taught in the course to communicate about a range of issues. My observations of their performance supported this analysis. They had improved as speakers. However, the social dynamic that typically existed in on-campus lessons, which made the discussions increasingly friendly as the course progressed, was largely absent in this case. What precisely, if anything, was lost by this is a matter for a more in-depth future analysis. I might suggest that the limitation of one's discussion to a relatively formal tone means that one gains experience *being* formal, but as the range of discussion topics and partners in one's life is likely to be varied, experience beyond formality would be of significant use.

Conclusion

At the outset of this semester, I was concerned, not that the lessons *could not* be successfully conducted in the manner described above, but that such changes to the lesson delivery method might be detrimental to student performance. I worried that without the full in-class time and the benefits of the highly interactive real-world classroom setting, the students might be at a serious disadvantage. In short, this has not been the case.

Looking at overall student performance, indeed by almost any metric, it is clear that students were able to perform at a level roughly analogous to students of their same ability levels in past, in-classroom, lessons. Overall class grades were roughly the same as in previous semesters for most classes, and somewhat improved for others. This finding is supported by others, such as Diaz (1999), who found "no significant differences" (p. 130) between classes delivered in a classroom setting and those delivered remotely through the use of multimedia technology. I observed, taking into account all 11 separate discussion classes I taught in the Spring semester, no classes that demonstrated a marked diminution in assignment/discussion scoring. This is, however, not to say that there is no difference between the two types of lessons.

Indeed, there are certain benefits conferred by being physically in-class for 100 minutes, chief among these is the luxury of time. Practice sections can be repeated. Discussion sections can be longer. Again, because of a greater amount of available time, in-class feedback can be more interactive and, as outlined above, more introspective. All these things are the result, simply, of having more time. The time pressure inherent to a 40-minute lesson encompassing the basic lesson stages of

presentation, practice, and production while also maximizing the students' speaking time means that some things must be compressed, others omitted.

In my experience, the switch to Zoom lessons has meant paring the lessons down to only the most essential features. It has also meant even more preparation on my part. In a classroom, I could easily place a great deal of content on the whiteboard over the course of the 100 minutes of the lesson, but now, even with a whiteboard feature available, time pressure has led me to create succinct slideshow presentations to accompany the initial presentation of skills. This is only one example, and slideshow presentations are not bad, but doing something like using a pre-prepared slideshow is less interactive than other in-class options might be. This is indicative, I think of the overall difference between my Zoom lessons and in-class lessons. The student to student communication dynamic is largely intact. The students can communicate at length with their peers. However, the teacher-student dynamic is different. It is clipped, and necessarily so. If we are to reserve as much time as possible for students' speaking, we must, as instructors, speak as little as possible while remaining effective as instructors. This begs the question, is it a bad thing to speak less? As long as a teacher is able to guide students effectively towards improvement, I think the answer is no.

If my concerns about the effect of online discussion lessons on student performance were unfounded, what positive lessons have I learned from the experience? Three come readily to mind. The first has been, at least indirectly, noted several times throughout the course of this article. To reduce a lesson to the most essential elements is not a bad thing, as long as this reduction is done with care to preserve the maximum possible student speaking time while still providing adequate guidance. Second, technology itself can be a great help. This is not simply a trite endorsement of the digital age. Rather, the implementation of online assignment delivery, at least for written work, and the use of online tools to manage and document said assignments can greatly streamline all involved processes. Grading and grade management will, undoubtedly, continue to occupy a great deal of teachers' time, but I certainly plan to continue the use of online assignment tools even after in-class lessons resume.

The third lesson I learned is related to the one distinct negative point discussed above, namely, the apparent lessened sense of community and camaraderie amongst the students. In the current semester, fall 2020, I am teaching two types of courses, Presentation and Debate. In these courses, I have tried, to what extent I can, to lessen the impact of this effect. I have tried to foster a greater sense of community in class. I have changed the ratio of in-class and offline class time in favor of lengthier online sections. I have also encouraged group work and collaboration. Both approaches have their drawbacks. In the case of the former, students face the same data limitations as in the previous semester, so the choice to lengthen online time must be a careful and calculated one. In the case of the latter, while I can encourage collaboration outside of class, I cannot monitor or evaluate the effectiveness of this collaboration except by its result, though I should note that the results have been positive so far[4].

The challenges faced by students and teachers as many classes have transitioned to online environments during the COVID-19 global pandemic are very real. However, it is worth noting that the trend over recent decades, particularly the last 20 years, is towards a university experience that blends traditional classroom-taught lessons and online lessons. Moskal, writing in 2006, noted that,

4　This is to say that the quality of student work produced through collaboration has been high. The effects on camaraderie are more difficult to quantify; however, I have noted a far larger proportion of students who refer to their classmates distinctly as 'friends.'

"Net generation-students … [have] lifestyles that involve frequent use of personal, mobile, and digital technologies…Today's college students have grown up expecting everything to be available online" (p. 26). Today, in 2020, online technologies have become fully integrated into the lives of many, if not most, students. It seems likely that the dual realities of increasingly prevalent networked technologies and a world that seeks a way forward in the face of uncertainties and crises will turn more and more towards online courses.

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